

Book Review: Power and Policy in Putin's Russia by Richard Sakwa et al.

Apr 8 2012

In this analysis of Putin's eight years as president between 2000 and 2008, an international group of leading academics examine Putin's leadership, ideology and the power of corruption. Eleanor Bindman recommends this in-depth study as a useful resource for anyone wishing to learn about the way in which the Russian political system operated and in many ways continues to operate in more detail.



Power and Policy in Putin's Russia. Edited by Richard Sakwa. Routledge. 262 pages. December 2011.

Find this book:



As Russia deals with the fallout from one of its most controversial presidential elections since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new study provides a timely analysis of Vladimir Putin's first two terms as the country's president from 2000 to 2008. *Power and Policy in Putin's Russia* is a collection of essays by leading international academics specialising in Russian affairs which examines a wide variety of important political and economic issues related to Putin's time in office. Each chapter addresses a different aspect of Putin's presidency, ranging from party politics, foreign policy and corruption to the country's problematic dependence on its natural resources and Putin's unique style of leadership.

The volume is edited by Richard Sakwa, a leading British expert on Russian politics based at the University of Kent. Sakwa has previously published two textbooks on politics under Putin which are widely used in UK universities and for this volume he provides an introductory chapter analysing Putin's strengths and weaknesses as a political leader. While recognising the neo-authoritarian elements within Putin's approach to leadership, Sakwa avoids the tendency of many Western commentators to see Putin as a repressive, Soviet-style ruler and points instead to the element of continuity between Putin's approach and that of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. Both men favoured a highly personalised form of patronage politics, and neither of them had much trust in the institutions or society that they governed.

Ultimately, Sakwa argues, this led to the development of a form of 'para-politics' which emphasised internal elite intrigues and operated outside of the restraints of formal constitutional politics. At the same time, Putin enjoyed enormous public popularity throughout his time on office due to his apparent success in stabilising Russia's economy and his rhetorical commitment to improving living conditions. This was an approach which contrasted sharply with the chaos of the Yeltsin era and explains the residual support Putin continues to enjoy amongst certain sections of the Russian population, even as disenchanted protesters in Moscow and St Petersburg take to the streets.

The importance of decisions made at an elite level is a theme further developed by Oxana Gaman-Golutvina, whose chapter compares and contrasts Yeltsin and Putin's attitudes towards Russia's notorious oligarchs. Gaman-Golutvina argues that under Yeltsin the oligarchs wielded such influence that state power effectively became privatised. As a result, once Putin took office he had little choice but to reassert the power of the state and the federal centre by curbing the influence of Russia's economic and regional elites. This meant strengthening the position of the bureaucracy and recruiting large numbers of his fellow former employees from the KGB and St Petersburg mayoral office to the federal political elite. As Gaman-Golutvina points out, this process was in fact highly ambiguous: while Yeltsin's clan of advisors, or 'family,' was gradually replaced by Putin's KGB colleagues and friends from his St Petersburg days, this new team was far from united. Divisions existed, both then and now, between the KGB faction and the more liberal St Petersburg recruits, with the only common denominator being the loyalty of both groups to their leader. This approach worked because of Putin's determination to concentrate power in his own hands, although his ability to do so has started to look slightly shakier of late.

Several of the arguments presented in this volume will already be familiar to followers of Russian politics since a number of the chapters were published as articles in an academic journal in 2008. In addition, the book is very much targeted at an academic audience with prior knowledge of the Russian political scene. Those with more of a passing interest may find the less specialised and statistic-heavy style of recent books on Putin's regime such as *The Man Without a Face* by Masha Gessen or [The Strongman](#) by Angus Roxburgh more accessible. The fact that the period covered by the book ends in 2008 also limits its appeal somewhat given the crucial role Putin continued to play as prime minister under his presidential successor Dmitriy Medvedev from 2008 to early 2012 and the fact that he has once again assumed presidential office himself. Nevertheless, such an in-depth study of various aspects of Putin's first two presidential terms would certainly be a useful resource for anyone wishing to learn about the way in which the Russian political system operated and in many ways continues to operate in more detail.

Eleanor Bindman is a third-year PhD researcher in Politics at the University of Glasgow. Her research focuses on the EU's human rights policy in relation to Russia, with other research interests including contemporary Russian politics, international relations and social policy. She previously studied Russian language, history and politics at the universities of Edinburgh and London and in 2010 worked as an intern for the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Prior to starting her PhD she worked as a research assistant for Human Rights Watch in Moscow and has also worked as a freelance translator for several years.

Related posts:

1. [Book Review: The Labour Party in Britain and Norway: Elections and the Pursuit of Power Between the World Wars \(8.8\)](#)
2. [Five minutes with Sir Tony Brenton: "In twenty years' time Russia won't be perfect, but it will be a great deal closer to what Europe can regard as good neighbour than it is now" \(8.3\)](#)
3. [Book Review: The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia by Angus Roxburgh \(16.9\)](#)

This entry was posted in [Book Reviews](#), [Eleanor Bindman](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

[Edit](#)